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SUBJECT: GAZA SITUATION REPORT, JANUARY 08, 1230

REF: TEL AVIV 44

Classified By: DCM Luis G. Moreno. Reason 1.4 (B/D)

11. (S) SUMMARY: As of 1215 local, the security cabinet is meeting following a three hour meeting of PM Olmert, FM Livni, and DM Barak in which they were to discuss how to respond to the UNSCR resolution for a ceasefire and whether to recommend beginning phase 3 of Operation Cast Lead, which would entail a massive ground operation into urban areas. According to some local press reports, Barak favors ending the operation as soon as there is an agreement, Livni believes the deterrence has been reached and the operation can end now, while Olmert is pressing to go forward. Meanwhile, the IDF appears to be moving advancing with plans for a ground operation along the Philadelphi corridor following assessments that the aerial bombardment has not been effective enough. The IDF believes it must move quickly against the tunnels because it has little faith that the pending ceasefire will adequately address smuggling. The border with Lebanon remains calm, with the IDF assessing it was a Palestinian terror group, not Hizballah, that launched the rockets. However, The IDF did threaten a more forceful reaction against Lebanon if UNIFIL proves ineffective and rockets continue. On the humanitarian side, COGAT has confirmed that there will be another pause between 1300-1600 local today. However, delivery of aid is threatened as UNRWA, the primary transporter of aid, has stopped all movements within Gaza for the next two days in response to the attacks on their convoys yesterday.

Military Operations

12. (S) The IDF is assessing the effectiveness of its air operations to close the tunnels along the Rafah border, but preliminary assessments seem to indicate it has not been effective enough and a ground operation may be necessary. Leaflets dropped by IDF telling residents along the Rafah border telling people to evacuate their homes also suggest an imminent ground operation into the Philadelphi corridor. Overnight, DAO observed heightened preparations for a ground operation in southern Gaza. Bombardment of the Philadelphi corridor also continued, with 20-30 strikes of 2000 pound bombs. In the northern Gaza strip, DAO observed continued concentration of forces and reservist activity, with the deployment of one reservist combat brigade in vicinity of Northern Gaza.

13. (U) IDF reports that over night the Israel Air Force targeted 25 sites last night and killed 3 PIJ rocket team leaders. Other targets included 9 weapons storehouses, mostly under the homes of Hamas activists, 4 rocket launching sites, a vehicle carrying a rocket launcher, 2 Hamas outposts, and tunnels along the Gaza strip. The IDF also claims it has taken hundreds of Hamas prisoners during the operation. A total of 3 IDF soldiers were killed overnight (1 in combat, 1 by sniper fire, 1 by anti-tank rocket),

bringing the total to 10 during Operation Cast Lead, and 19 soldiers were wounded, 2 seriously, bringing the total wounded to 148.

14. (U) The IDF says there were 17 strikes into Israel overnight and this morning, including 6 Grad, 9 Qassam and 4 mortars, with both Be'er Sheva and Ashkelon targeted by the Grads. There were no reports of any injuries.

15. (SBU) The border with Lebanon remains calm following the three rockets fired yesterday afternoon. The IDF released a public summary of the rocket firings yesterday, saying that it believes Palestinian terrorist were responsible. It called for increased UNIFIL patrols and said that while Israel does not want an escalation, it is "prepared to respond if necessary." The report also emphasized that Israel holds the Government of Lebanon responsible for the activities in its territory. Separately, the MFA released a statement saying it is finally a formal protest with the UN over this serious violation of UNSCR 1701.

Political Developments

16. (U) The "kitchen cabinet" of PM Olmert, FM Livni and MD Barak are meeting ahead of a scheduled security cabinet meeting this afternoon. The discussions are reportedly focused around Israel's reaction to last night's UNSCR and whether to authorize phase 3 of Operation Cast Lead. Phase 3 reportedly would involve a massive call up of reserves, incursion into the densest urban areas, and several more weeks of activity. According to some local press reports,

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Barak favors withdrawing once an agreement is reached, Livni believes deterrence has been accomplished and Operation Cast Lead can end, while Olmert believes the operation has not accomplished its objectives and should continue. Additional press stories focus on the restlessness of ground commanders in Gaza who continue to hold their positions, saying that they are nearing their third day in the same location and are therefore becoming increasingly vulnerable to attacks from Hamas.

17. (U) Media reports indicate MG Amos Gilad returned from Egypt last night after gaining little in discussions over the Egyptian-French ceasefire proposal. The reports say Hamas-Damascus turned down the ceasefire proposal because it did not include opening the crossings, and Egypt continued to refuse an international border force within its territories. The press also focused on increasing efforts by President Peres to get involved in brokering a ceasefire.

Humanitarian Situation

18. (U) According to the COGAT, 89 trucks with humanitarian goods entered Gaza strip yesterday, 68 through Kerem Shalom and 21 through Erez. In addition 315,000 liters of industrial fuel entered at the Nahal Oz crossing, along with 143 tons of cooking gas. A total of 223 foreign nationals were also evacuated through Erez yesterday.

19. (U) UNRWA has suspended all movements to pick up and distribute humanitarian goods for January 9 and 10. USAID and other donors rely exclusively on UNRWA to transport relief supplies into Gaza. Since December 27, USAID has procured supplies worth approximately USD15,000 to the Patient's Friends Benevolent Society that has been delivered by UNRWA. An additional USD285,000 of goods has been procured and are awaiting delivery at the UNRWA Jerusalem-based warehouse. USAID plans to increase procurement of goods six-fold over the coming days.

110. (U) The Embassy and USAID are continuing to pressure

COGAT and Joint Coordination Room (JCR) commander Baruch Spiegel to increase access for humanitarian aid and provide faster approvals for goods to be brought into the strip, including an outstanding request for medical equipment for Al Ahli hospital. Embassy, ConGen and USAID are also working with the GOI and ICRC on the evacuation of an additional 138 Amcits and non-Amcit family members from the Gaza Strip. We are also coordinating the temporary evacuation (to the West Bank) of 49 Palestinian employees and program partners in Gaza.

Livni Briefs Dip Corps and IO

¶11. (C) Late Thursday evening (January 8), Foreign Minister Livni, JCR Baruch Spiegel and COGAT representatives briefed the diplomatic and international organization community on humanitarian relief coordination efforts. The briefing was overshadowed by three separate incidents yesterday in which ICRC and UNWRA convoys were fired on. An ICRC ambulance convoy took small arms fire on the outskirts of Khan Younis while in direct phone contact with IDF/COGAT coordinators. An UNWRA ambulance and field car took small arms fire on Salaheddin Street in Gaza City (IDF claims it had no one in the area). Finally, an UNWRA relief supply convoy from the Erez crossing was mistakenly hit by gunfire from an IDF tank despite coordination efforts.

¶12. (SBU) FM Livni opened the briefing by stressing four points:

-- Israel entered Gaza to change the equation of indiscriminate Hamas firing on Israeli citizens.

-- Hamas has taken the citizens of Gaza hostage, which is why Israel is doing its best to ensure delivery of humanitarian assistance and to avoid civilian casualties.

-- Israel will not make any agreement with terror; the international community should not equate Israel and Hamas nor should it force recognition of Hamas as a legitimate government.

-- Hamas cannot be allowed to rearm; the whole international community, not just Egypt and Israel, needs to act to interdict arms supply shipments into the Sinai.

Investigations into Humanitarian Convoy Attacks

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¶13. (SBU) JCR Commander Spiegel then made a presentation on the JCR's organization and mission, noting that 25 humanitarian liaison officers had been assigned, covering all the field commanders operating in Gaza. He promised a full, rapid investigation of the attacks on the ICRC and UNWRA convoys and on the IDF's four-day delay in permitting the ICRC access to dead and wounded in the Gaza City suburbs. (Comment: MOD PolMil chief Amos Gilad will be meeting with UNSCO, UNWRA and ICRC officials at 3:00 pm on Friday to present them with the preliminary results of those investigations. End Comment). EconCouns pressed JCR staff after the briefing on the need for as full an accounting as possible of the recent attacks on ICRC and UNWRA convoys and realistic assurances of actions taken to avoid a repeat.

¶14. (C) MFA DDG Irit Ben-Abba (protect) told EconCouns on January 9 that the IDF confirms it was an Israeli tank that mistakenly opened fire on the UNRWA truck approaching Erez yesterday (Note: IDF has not publicly confirmed this. End Note). She said that there were no IDF troops operating in the vicinity of the UNRWA staff/ambulance convoy that was hit near Gaza City, although she could not dismiss that it was Special Forces as witnesses say they saw soldiers. Finally, she said that she did not know how the ICRC convoy was hit

outside Khan Younis while it was on the phone with COGAT, but
the investigation is on-going.

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